

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Ear Mountain WMA Grazing Lease Renewals

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

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Background

The Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (EMWMA) provides foothill grassland habitat for a variety of wildlife, including bighorn sheep, mule deer, grizzly and black bears, many species of nesting birds, and a variety other wildlife. Beginning in 1991, a rest-rotation cattle grazing system was established on the 2,120-acre south pasture of EMWMA to enhance the availability of quality native forage for wildlife. In 1992, a similar rest-rotation grazing system was established for the 960-acre north pasture. Year-round and seasonal forage for mule deer and bighorn sheep has been enhanced and structural diversity of vegetation for a variety of wildlife has been accomplished through the use of grazing. Public hunting access opportunity on the lessee's property has also been incorporated within the grazing leases. FWP proposes renewing each of these leases for a period of six years (two full grazing cycles). Both leases are charged the standard grazing fee rate per FWP's grazing lease payment schedule. The maximum allowed stocking rates for the south and north pastures would be 391 and 70 animal unit months, respectively. The value of the north pasture lease is less than \$5,000, so technically this lease does not require commission approval, however, given the scope of the environmental assessment, it is included here.

Public Involvement Process & Results

In March 2019, FWP issued a draft EA and solicited public comment for a 22-day period for the proposed renewal of EMWMA grazing leases. One public comment was received and was in favor of the Proposed Action. Based on this public comment and given the original scope of the EA, no modifications to the draft EA were necessary. The draft EA along with the Decision Notice were considered final, contingent on commission approval.

Alternatives and Analysis

Alternative A was analyzed as the proposed action. Alternatives B and C would either approve only one of the proposed grazing leases or not renew either lease on EMWMA. In the absence of grazing, forage quality (palatability) for mule deer and bighorn sheep would decline over time and the diversity of cover and associated attractiveness by different wildlife species would be reduced. One or both of the lessees would be required to find additional grazing pasture elsewhere, and they would not be required to allow public hunting access on their properties. FWP would continue to manage EMWMA for the benefit of wildlife and public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends renewing the described six-year rest-rotation grazing lease cycle on the WMA. The proposed grazing leases would continue to use cattle grazing as a management tool for enhancing forage and cover characteristics while also benefiting local producers with additional early (June) and late (August) summer pasture for their cattle. Routine fence maintenance would be carried out by the lessees and FWP personnel. In addition to habitat benefits, the leases would help continue good relations with local ranchers/neighbors while also providing additional public hunting opportunities on their private ranches.

Proposed Motion

I move the commission approve the Ear Mountain WMA rotational grazing system leases as proposed.